

Visit to the Shaker Settlement— Whitewater Village, O.

By Benn Pitman

Who can walk over a broad estate without feeling some kind of respect for the owner? Who can behold a well cultivated farm without admiring the industry that made it so? Who can see big barns, stored with plenty, without feeling something of the blessedness of needful wealth? Who can see truthful simplicity without loving it, or integrity without admiring it; or cleanliness, regularity, quietude and order, without wishing that all the world—and his wife too, were duly impressed with the beatitude of these virtues. It is something to meet with men whose word is respected, whose statements are received as undisputed facts; who, when they buy do not depreciate, and when they sell do not exaggerate; who labor for each other as for themselves, and desire no good which they are not willing that each member of the community should equally share.

“And pray,” asks Worldling “where are we to look for this paradisiacal state of things? I have traveled the world over and have not found it.”

Perhaps so, but go to the Shaker settlement and you will be surprised at the near approach to it that has been made by this people. “Fanaticism,” says Worldling;—if so, it is astonishing how near like what we conceive genuine Christianity might be, is the imitation of this people.

If it be fanaticism to possess houses, lands and goods in abundance,—all acquired by honest toil; to throw wide their doors and invite all who will to come and partake equally of their toils and treasures; to offer shelter and support to the widow, the orphan and the homeless; to exercise kindness towards each other and charity towards all; to know no masters and no servants, and where he that is greatest is servant of all — if this be fanaticism, then is Shakerism not but fanaticism!

The Shaker settlement at Whitewater village, in this state, is established on a magnificent farm of about fifteen hundred acres. It contains three “homes,” or residences, and though we believe this settlement is one of the smallest in the Union, it consists of about two hundred souls.

The stranger who visits this people is at first sorely puzzled, on observing that none are more ambitiously clad than others, to ascertain

who is “Chief” or “leader;” and still more when he discovers that the simple hearted man who came with horses and wagon to fetch his guests from the nearest railroad station, and who in all respects displayed the submission of the servant, is the one who will perhaps make the most touching address at their religious gathering, and is privileged “to lead off in the dance.” The “sister” too, who waits at table and who afterwards washes up the dishes, will most likely be discovered to be “deaconess.”

The first notable feature of Shakerism is the antique style of dress still retained. The broad brimmed straw hat; the long tailed coat of linen, stuff or woolen, with trousers of corresponding home-made material; the absence of any cravat, its place being supplied by the shirt collar neatly folded but innocent of starch; the closely shaven face; the short cropped hair but with a fringe of greater length behind, and home made shoes, complete the outward decorations of the “believer.”

The sisters are clad in garments still more at variance with nineteenth century fashions and all our worldly notions of aesthetical propriety. The most striking feature of the female attire is its excessive slimness, occasioned by the short-waisted and long skirted dress, the folds of which are all disposed behind. The dresses vary in color but are all of sober neutral tints. Over the shoulders is pinned a neckerchief of check muslin, sufficiently open at the neck to display the neatly folded collar of a close fitting, Swiss muslin habit shirt. The sisters’ hair, guiltless alike of the levity of a curl or the classic graces of a braid, is all combed back and hid underneath a black band; over which is worn a small close fitting starched muslin cap, so precise and formal, that lace, ribbons, and floral trickery would, if brought into comparison, blush at their wanton superfluities! In the open air a bonnet is worn of the cottage shape, but of such severe portions that one had need to look with care to observe the pale, mild face modestly hid at the bottom.

Perhaps the next notable feature of Shakerism is, that believers regard the highest and nearest relationship between the sexes to be that of “Brethren and sisters in Christ.” The carnal relationship which “unbelievers” term marriage, they eschew. They regard the monogomic relation as a modified form of the evil doings of David, Solomon and the Israelitish patriarchs, or the modern imitations of Brigham Young. They prefer to follow Pelz teachings with literal exactitude,—those who are single remain so, and those who have wives are as though they had none.

The “homes” are arranged in consonance with this idea. The

central hall and passage divide the male from the female portions of the building, and two distinct stairways for the brethren and sisters respectively communicate with the different floors.

The family rises at half past four in the summer, and five in the winter, retiring not later than nine. Meals are taken in the dining room, one row of tables being occupied by the brethren and another on the opposite side by the sisters.

The labors of the sisters consist of the duties incidental to a large home and a numerous family, such as sweeping, cleaning, cooking, weekly washing (the chief labor of which is performed by machinery driven by horse power;) weaving, making their own and the brethrens' clothing, milking, (save on Sundays when the labor is performed by the brethren,) butter and cheese making, and the culture of silk worms, poultry, etc. The brethrens' labors are farming, gardening (their revenue from the sales of seed alone amounts to about fifteen hundred dollars yearly,) building, broom making, shoe making for home use, and the labors connected with the saw and grist mill, besides attending the Cincinnati market when the teams can be spared from the labors of the farm.

In contemplating this domestic machinery it is impossible not to be struck with the entire absence of compulsion or servitude. There are no masters, consequently no servants; each does his or her duties with characteristic zeal and in comparative silence, but with far less of that bustle, confusion, and make-believe so frequently observable in the domestic affairs of a family.

Of the religious ceremonies of this people we would willingly avoid making mention were it not that so much that is foolish and false has been said respecting them, and did we not think it possible to be accurate without purposely casting one jot of ridicule upon them; the dancing, marching, and tripping moreover form so unique a feature of the Shaker worship, that to omit all mention of them would be to leave our description most incomplete.

The meeting house is a large room with a remarkably clean oak floor; the entire furniture (if we except a few low benches arranged round the room for strangers,) consisting of a small lamp suspended from the ceiling! As the believers assemble, the brethren arrange themselves in rows on one side, the eldest being in front, and facing the sisters who are similarly disposed of on the other. Each brother worships minus his coat, and over each sister's left arm hangs a folded handkerchief. The worshipers' hands

are demurely clasped before them and all eyes are piously bent to the floor.

After a few minutes have been passed in silence, a tune is commenced and sung in unison by all present. A short silence succeeds, when a brother, with some hesitancy and much feeling, declares his experience of a believer's satisfaction at having escaped the miseries and sorrows of the world, to find the promised blessing in the joys of the Millennial Church. He expresses his heart felt gratitude that he has been led to the light; that he has forsaken houses and lands, father and mother, wife and children to dwell with the brethren and sisters in Christ, where, neither marrying nor giving in marriage, they are as the angels of God in heaven! The brother concludes by saying "let us now go forth in the march."

About a dozen males and females now take their place in the center of the room in a double row and form the choir, around them are formed two circles, the inner one composed of children, boys and girls in couples headed by their "care-takers," the outer one composed of brethren and sisters also in couples. As the singing commences the inner circle marches in one direction and the outer in the opposite. The strain is lively, the tune distinctly marked, and consequently the march becomes a measured run.

The step of the younger ones is light and tripping, and occasionally even graceful. Now and then while marching all clap hands to the measure. When not clapping, the arms are held slightly extended in front, the palms of the hands being uppermost, in the attitude of receiving. The strain closes with a rallentando or slackening of the time, the last note being prolonged, during which all make a significant and humble obeisance by inclining the head, and lowering and at the same time extending the hands.

At the conclusion of the march, another brother details his experiences, his hopes and joys, after which the believers are invited "to go forth in the dance." The brethren and sisters now turn and face the head of the room: a tune is commenced of the most lively description, to the measure of which all dance with nimble steps, now advancing, now retiring, occasionally turning around, marching and counter marching.

The scene is novel in the extreme, but not extravagant: there is an air of such religious earnestness in all that is done, such an evidence of inward peace and satisfaction, causing them to be unmindful of the presence of the curious and perchance the scoffing stranger, that though we may smile at their ceremonies we must admire their sincerity and their undoubted faithfulness to their convictions.

Another brief recital of experience followed the exercises above

mentioned, and so overcome was the brother with the fervor of his devotion that he exclaimed "I want to praise God," "So do I," repeated other brethren and sisters, and forthwith, overcome with pious fervor they leapt into the air, clapping their hands high above their heads in ecstatic devotion.

An interesting feature of the services at the sabbath morning assembly consisted of reciprocal congratulations. Some were present at this gathering who had probably not met during the previous week, and filled with kind and tender feelings as they evidently were, some of the brethren would leave their places and passing in front of the sisterhood, would exclaim "my love to you this morning, my love to you my sisters" "Thank you brother," the sisters responded, their countenances beaming with emotion. The brothers dispersed their love not only by words and looks, but by a significant waving of the hands, which love the sisterhood received by gestures as if drawing the love towards them in thankful appropriation.

These religious festivities last from one to three hours, and as there are no seats provided, when the worshippers need rest they humbly recline on the floor.

Of the musical portion of the Shaker ceremonies we must not omit to state that they are not borrowed from the world. Both words and music are believed to be derived through the agency of spirits! Occasionally Indian songs and words are thus communicated, and sung by the society without their interpretation being known. What are believed to be spiritual communications have not been unfrequent among this people since their first establishment; and the phenomena now known in the world as "spiritualism" they state had long been foretold by the spirits who habitually communicated with them. Ann Lee, their original founder, for whom they entertain a reverent affection, and whom they fondly term "Mother Ann" frequently communicates with the more favored of her flock.

We have thus far endeavored to present the external aspects of Shakerism, as they are, seen from a "believer's" point of view: each reader is thus left to form his own judgment, and may determine how far his ideal millennium is realized, in the advent of "Shakerism." Those who have been close observers of human nature in its different stages of mental development will not be at a loss to account for much that pertains to Shakerism.

In their intercourse with strangers the brethren are somewhat reserved but uniformly civil and obliging. Towards those whose sympathies are with

them, they are communicative and affable.

Their homes are models of cleanliness, neatness and order, and though there are no sitting rooms that do not equally serve for sleeping rooms, the entire absence of disorder and unpleasant associations is as remarkable as it is commendable. The brethren do not chew nor smoke; - a great virtue in Americans; their floors consequently are not defiled by the necessary results of this shocking and abominable practice.

But to us, at least, the most interesting and noteworthy phase of Shakerism is, that it is a practical and successful illustration of a community based on the associative principle; where each labors for all, and all for each. A cooperative band has, in this case, won from the forest a magnificent farm, it has built its houses, store houses and offices; it feeds and clothes its people and supports its schools, and year by year increases its stores and revenue at the rate of \$3000.00 per annum. Here is the accomplished fact.

America is yet too young, its commerce too lucrative, its unappropriated territory too vast to permit of much anxious care being bestowed upon this most vital of social questions. And yet there are few among those whose sympathies have led them to consider the subject, who believe that the selfish antagonism engendered by the present state of things is the best, and therefore final state of social existences; and that the present competitive state of society is best fitted for developing the full and harmonious growth of our nobler faculties. In the present state of things we see that incapacity and merit are alike misplaced, labor's treasures misused, human life degraded, and faith in humanity wanting, - because the temptations to littleness and temporizing are felt to be stronger than our power of resistance. There is no worthy leading; no humble following; the highest and best are too often confounded with the meanest and worst, and the main achievements of life born of and nurtured by ignoble considerations of profit or temporary fame.

The main argument against the organization of labor, such as is here so successfully carried out by the Shakers, is, that men are too selfish to act from other than selfish motives; - that to attempt to build up a co-operative organization out of existing materials would be like building a bridge out of solid intentions and rotten bricks! Our lasting gratitude then is due to those who have rescued humanity from so grave a libel by a sixty-years experiment, every year increasing in extent, stability and wealth.

While we regard the Shaker experiment as a successful illustration of the associative principle, we must do the "believers" the justice of adding that

they regard it wholly as a consequence of the establishment in them and by them of the Millennial Church; that in them as was foretold by Daniel, a kingdom has been set up which shall never be destroyed! Be this as it may, there are broad lands and abundance of wealth acquired by associative industry, and this is but one of eighteen equally successful experiments existing at this moment in the United States to attest the practicability and advantages of cooperative labor. And what they have done, may not we with like conditions indefinitely repeat? In France and England much attention has been given to the subject of cooperative labor by some of the most advanced minds of the age. "The problem" says Louis Blanc "is obscure; it is terrible it has provoked revolts which have drenched the earth in blood without liberating it. It has exhausted generations of thinkers! Lo! For two thousand years men have knelt before the cross, and adored in him who perished there on the Savior of mankind, and yet how many slaves still remain. How many unfortunates in the outward and visible existence! How much triumphant inequity! How much tyranny enjoying at its ease the impunity of its villainies! The Redeemer has come, — but the redemption — When will it arrive?"